

Misplaced Hunger

Scripture: Amos 6:4-7; Proverbs 23:19-21; 1 Corinthians 6:12-13a; 11:17-22;
Ecclesiastes 6:7-9; Matthew 5:6

It's obvious to anyone who sees me that I often hunger for food that doesn't satisfy. I identify with the old lady in the story. I swallow more and more and don't know why. And this excess could lead directly to my demise.

My poor choices and lack of self-control when it comes to eating caused me to hope that one of our guest speakers during this series on vices and virtues¹ would choose gluttony as their focus. But, no such luck. They chose pride, sloth, and wrath instead. And so I find myself in the uncomfortable position of preaching on gluttony,

By the way, when we end the series next week you might notice that we left one out, another one that's uncomfortable to talk about, lust. Last summer's series on healthy sexuality covered much of what I would say about lust and chastity. You can visit our church's website to read those sermons. Also, we're beginning a series on 1 Corinthians soon. I anticipate the topic will come up then as well. For now, back to the vice of the day.

In its most literal sense, gluttony is an excessive and ongoing eating of food and drink. A google search of the word results in an array of disturbing and occasionally humorous images.

But this vice goes beyond food and body size. According to Wikipedia, *gluttony means over-indulgence and over-consumption of food, drink, or wealth items, particularly as status symbols. In Christianity, it is considered a sin if the excessive desire for food causes it to be withheld from the needy.*² The Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Amos were especially livid against those upper-class people in their time who had lavish banquets with wine and meat, while so many were living in poverty.³

Here's what Amos had to say:⁴

*Grief is coming to those who lounge on beds inlaid with ivory,
who stretch out on their luxurious sofas,
And who feast on lambs from their flocks
and stall-fattened calves anytime, not just during festivals.
Grief is coming to those who sing foolish songs to the sounds of the harp,
who think they can play like David;
Who guzzle fine wine by the gallon from elegant bowls;
who apply expensive oils to their bodies, when cheaper ones will do,
But they are not grieved by the awful state of Joseph's people.
That is why they will be the first ones carried off into exile,
and their lives of leisure and feasting will disappear.*

¹ Snakes and Ladders: A Worshipful Study of the "Seven Deadly Sins" and "Seven Holy Virtues," *Leader, Summer 2019*, Vol. 16, No. 4, ©2019 MennoMedia, pp. 37-48.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gluttony>

³ Isaiah 5:8-23; Amos 2:6-8; 6:1-7

⁴ Amos 6:4-7, *The Voice*

The Apostle Paul was critical when these disparities manifested themselves within the Christian community in Corinth. Paul writes: ⁵

On this next matter, I wish I could applaud you; but I can't because your gatherings have become counterproductive, making things worse for the community rather than better. Let me start with this: I hear that your gatherings are polarizing the community; and to be honest, this doesn't surprise me. I've accepted the fact that factions are sometimes useful and even necessary so that those who are authentic and those who are counterfeit may be recognized. This distinction is obvious when you come together because it is not the Lord's Supper you are eating at all. When it's time to eat, some hastily dig right in; but look—some have more than others: over there someone is hungry, and over here someone is drunk! What is going on? If a self-centered meal is what you want, can't you eat and drink at home? Do you have so little respect for God's people and this community that you shame the poor at the Lord's table? I don't even know what to say to you! Are you looking for my approval? You won't find it.

I wonder what Amos and Paul would say to us. Are our refrigerators, freezers, and cupboards full while the food bank's shelves are depleted? What are we doing to make sure someone else has enough while we have more than plenty?

It's become apparent when considering the list of vices that they are inter-related. Consider greed and gluttony.⁶ Greed deals with acquiring something beyond the point of need simply to have a lot of it, maybe even all of it. Gluttony is about the desire to consume things, to the point that one's hunger is never truly satisfied.

A world in which some collect and consume much more than they could ever possibly need while other people don't have even the barest necessities no matter how hard they work is not the world God desires. Each one of the vices has its root in the desire for more and the human need for excess. Over-indulgence, especially in the presence of extreme poverty, doesn't fulfill the greatest commandments. It goes against the root of Christianity which is love: love for God, love for other people, and love for ourselves.

Gluttony is about hunger, about seeking satisfaction. We all hunger for something – it may be food, it could also be excitement, power, relationship, validation, pleasure, or wealth. Much of what we hunger for is necessary to sustain life. The problems come when these things get out of balance, when we make not-so-good or bad choices in satisfying these hungers.

Our Thursday evening Zoom gathering will begin using the book *Addiction Nation* by Timothy McMahan King as the basis of discussion beginning September 3. Even though he is writing about the opioid crisis, the topics King discusses could be applied to any kind of addiction – any kind of hungering without being truly satisfied.

Here are excerpts from the first chapter of the book:⁷

[The opioid crisis] is born out of a crisis of meaning, a collapse of culture, constant consumption, corporate corruption, the end result of a so-called War on Drugs, a breakdown of public institutions, and a stifling of opportunity.

King traces the beginning of the crisis to President Jimmy Carter's "crisis of confidence" speech on July 15, 1979.⁸

Carter diagnosed that we were losing a confidence in building a future for our children that was better than our own. At the same time, we were losing a connection to the best of our past that could root and ground the country in that vision.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, *The Voice*

⁶ <https://worldbuilding.stackexchange.com/questions/79318/distinguishing-gluttony-greed-and-lust-in-their-modern-connotations#:~:text=Greed%20deals%20with%20hoarding%20simply%20to%20have%20things%20and%20many%20of%20them.&text=You%20want%20something%2C%20but%20you,hunger%20is%20never%20truly%20satisfied.>

⁷ Timothy McMahan King, *Addiction Nation: What the Opioid Crisis Reveals about Us*, Herald Press, 2019, pp. 15-19.

⁸ <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-15-1979-crisis-confidence-speech>

At the heart of the crisis was a question of who we are: “Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns,” Carter said. “But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.”

Carter said that the country was faced with two paths: The first reflected the “fragmentation and self-interest” inevitable in a country where people are defined by what they own and consume. In that road, freedom is understood as “the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others.”

The other path – the one through which he hoped to lead the country – was one of sacrifice, community, and service. “All the traditions of our past, all the lessons of our heritage, all the promises of our future point to another path – the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values,” the president said. “That path leads to true freedom for our nation and ourselves.”

The year 1979 was a turning point for the world’s wealthiest nation. That year marked the beginning of the exponential growth of drug overdoses in America.

The path the United States took was not one of shared sacrifice and renewed meaning. The vision that won equated happiness with increased consumption. Pharmaceutical companies promised pain relief without danger. It was a dream of a world that could pursue endless growth without consequence. Meaning and community and sacrifice could take care of themselves – as long as the economy grew.

The overdose crisis is just one manifestation of rising addictions across the world. Amid growing wealth, we consume. With technology designed to connect us, we are isolated. With more to entertain us, satisfy our preferences, and give us everything that we could want, it seems that we have less and less of what we need. Affluence that we hoped would protect us is revealed as a paltry defense from our own insatiable desires.

The addictive process is at work in all our lives. Addiction functions in our society and institutions, our politics, and our churches. Addiction feeds an economy and creates jobs even as it destroys lives and communities.

Vices are addictive. And, as we’ve observed over the past few weeks, our economy is based on vices. It promotes and runs on envy, pride, greed, lust, and gluttony with some sloth and wrath thrown in.

Gluttony is more than food, though it’s often focused on food. At the root of gluttony is a fear of scarcity that there won’t be enough. We try to bury or assuage our fears with food, alcohol, drugs, video games, social media, or something else that fills our bodies, minds, or time. Gluttony is a misplaced hunger and a mistrust of God’s providence.

On the other hand, the virtue of temperance and the practice of “enough” reminds us that what is available is sufficient—that there is enough. The Bible is filled with instructions to feed the hungry and make sure everyone has what they need to survive. Jesus chastises those who look out only for themselves and ignore the most vulnerable. He points out that true satisfaction isn’t found in material things, but in right relationships with God, people, and creation. Inner peace comes from a balanced life, not from overconsumption. Scripture reminds us that we need not fear, for God provides what we need.⁹ Temperance helps us to balance our use of what’s available to us, using them in moderation and for good.¹⁰

We are blessed when we’ve worked up a good appetite for God; when we hunger and thirst for righteousness; when we work to ensure that everyone has what they need while we enjoy what we have; when we actively seek right standing with God. When we do those things, we will be satisfied.¹¹

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ Commentary on gluttony and temperance draws from *Leader, Summer 2019*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁰ <https://www.looktohimandberadiant.com/2014/01/the-moral-virtues.html>

¹¹ Matthew 5:6, adapted from *The Message, English Standard Version, and Amplified Bible*.